

**Commissioner Mignon Clyburn Remarks to the National Urban League
Annual Convention 2015
July 30, 2015**

Good morning, Urban Leaguers! What an honor it is for me to take part in this year's annual convention, **Save Our Cities: Education, Jobs and Justice**. What a fitting theme, that so boldly encapsulates the events of the past year. But, if you would, allow me to pause and speak about the progress we as a nation have made over the last 12 months, because we too rarely focus on the good.

As a nation, we are seeing improvement when it comes to education – the high school dropout rate is falling. We are witnessing gains on the jobs front – the national unemployment rate is decreasing. We are making incremental but noteworthy steps when it comes to justice – we are witnessing a nationwide, bipartisan conversation on criminal justice reform, and we are seeing more scrutiny, investigations and charges levied on those who may have fallen short of the oath they were sworn to abide by. And, yes, most often the proof of this is bolstered by video, but it was not that long ago that even this degree of proof would not have made a difference.

But, as Dr. King reminded us, “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern, of dedicated individuals.”

You are those individuals. From President Marc Morial, to your National and Local trustees, to the leadership of your affiliates, and volunteers – to the Urban League Guild and Young Professionals, and to the National and local staff and supporters – we are grateful for your commitment to ensuring that African Americans and other underserved populations have access to the training and support needed to pursue equality and justice. Without a doubt, the progress and optimism we have are too often clouded by heartache and struggle. The protesters, supporters and empathizers of the #BlackLivesMatter movement are heartsick, but also engaged and determined to bring about change. The 11.3% of African Americans currently unemployed are heartsick, but continue to toil to support their families and search for opportunities. The nearly 500 counties in our nation classified as Persistent Poverty Areas – communities that have been disproportionately and desperately poor for 30 years or more – are heartsick, but many remain hopeful. They are longing for, and are in need of, support and empowerment from all of us.

Like you, I hear them, and refuse to let the pain of heartache wear me down or stifle my resolve. Each of us is here today because we realize that we are the architects and builders of change and hope.

It may sometimes seem that we are the only drafters and designers of the blueprints for success and opportunity, but we keep pushing, we keep moving, we refuse to keep our heads down or our backs bent.

For me, Urban Leaguers, it is about providing opportunities through communications. We have witnessed some real gains when broadband and technology are used to tackle some of our most chronic societal problems. Our economy is growing and communications technologies are empowering us and making our lives more convenient. Whether it is applying for a job, completing difficult homework assignments, buying a plane ticket or seeking medical help, this is all increasingly easier with Internet access. Entrepreneurs are accessing new platforms and solving new and long-standing problems. Broadband is breaking down barriers to achievement for minorities, people with disabilities, and the poor.

After all, when you are shopping online – you may never know what the seller or purchaser looks like. I have heard stories from people of color who say that they are making much more money online than they ever did when they were pounding the pavement and knocking on doors, facing rejection that many concluded may have been due to longstanding prejudices and biases.

But, even as an equalizer of opportunities, even with all of the hope that broadband brings, too many in our community cannot afford to be connected. Too many of our schools and libraries have inadequate broadband speeds. Too many children lack broadband at home to complete homework. Too many of our community schools are not offering Advanced Placement or advanced STEM courses, and this is putting our talented young people at a competitive disadvantage.

Companies that pay the best wages will never hire those who are not digitally proficient, and without each of us challenging high-tech companies to recruit from historically black colleges and universities and from state-supported schools, and without each of us being the bridge for those who do not have corporate contacts, our young people will never have a chance of being employed by high tech companies or any other company. This will leave our most talented unable to fully develop and market those excellent business ideas waiting to be unleashed, leaving our communities stuck on the wrong side of the opportunities divide, and less likely to gain access to venture capital networks or wealth.

This is why I am passionate about connecting the dots, between the promise of broadband and the actual results in people's lives.

I am determined to work with you to modernize our country's only low-income telecommunications affordability program, by making the existing support for Lifeline include support for broadband, not just voice-only service as it does today.

We have all heard that relevance, not cost, is the reason many do not have broadband. But as community leaders, you know firsthand that when you ask that proud senior on a fixed income whether she wants to sign up for broadband, her dignity will never allow her to admit that she cannot afford it. She will tell you that she does not need it, but we know that is just not true.

Pew Research Center just reported that African Americans have adopted broadband faster than any other group over the past 15 years. But they also reported that of the majority of those without broadband have household incomes lower than \$30,000 a year. So we are committed to ensuring that cost is no longer a barrier to broadband adoption, but this will only happen through partnerships with industry, the government, and you.

Last week, the Commission voted to approve a merger between AT&T and DirecTV. What you may not have heard, however, is that our office worked with the company to design a program that will offer individuals and families eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) the ability to purchase 10 Mbps of broadband for \$10 a month, without any connection or equipment fees or hidden charges. At that speed, you could download instructional videos, get wellness care through telemedicine, and start and maintain an online business.

We also recognize, however, that even if larger communications companies are created through consolidation, we still have an obligation to look out for small businesses and ensure that we promote independent and diverse television and radio programming. I will never abandon those goals, and I have called for the FCC to initiate proceedings to identify these opportunities.

And, I will not quit until the FCC finally and completely answers the calls of thousands of petitioners, who have been pleading for well over a decade for relief from those exorbitant telephone calling fees that are charged by companies that serve jails and prisons. We made a critical first step two years ago, but that did not solve the bulk of the problem for the majority of the 2.7 million children who are struggling to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent. The poorest of families, friends, and legal aid lawyers are shelling out \$400 and \$500 a month to keep in touch with their loved ones and provide support for their clients.

Hundreds of thousands of inmates are unable to stay connected with their communities, and as a consequence of not being able to keep in touch, they go home as strangers. This, I am convinced, plays a role in the fact that 75% of those released are back behind bars within five years.

I may not be able to stop every inmate from reoffending, but I can and will do my part when it comes to criminal justice reform. I can make a difference so that cost will not be the main barrier for families, friends and lawyers when it comes to maintaining contact with those who are incarcerated. The reason why this has gone on for so long is because too many of us have remained silent. The time is now for us to stop ignoring this problem. The time is now for you to push the FCC to finish what it started. The time is now for you to demand that those 40-plus states who refuse to address the issue of unfair inmate calling rates stop ignoring what Kim Keenan of MMTC calls a “tax on pain”.

For too many, we are all the hope they have. Each of us has the capacity and ability to push when needed, pull if required, prod when necessary, protect when warranted, and deliver always.

Let us use these hours we have to share, to sharpen our tools, be enlightened by new concepts and strategies, and get energized – so that we have the stamina needed to carry the torch of hope and change.

Thank you.